

These Days

By George E. Sokolsky

The Responsibility of the Intellectuals

I RECENTLY received a letter which contained this paragraph:

"You know better than I that the U. S. has fallen into Khrushchev's trap. I consider that it is the duty of American intellectuals to warn the people about this danger."



Sokolsky

The word, intellectuals, troubled me. Who is an intellectual? Adlai Stevenson, for instance, has been called an egghead and that word came to be used for an American who spoke grammatical and rhetorical English. It hardly denotes more than that. After all, Michael Pupin, one of the greatest physicists this country has known, did not necessarily speak so perfect an English, he having been born and reared in what is now called Yugoslavia. Perfection of speech does not necessarily represent perfection of thought. William Jennings Bryan was undoubtedly one of the greatest orators this Nation produced but he surely was not a man of enormous intellect. On the other hand, Abraham Lincoln never went to college, but he was a man of profound wisdom.

THE TERM, intellectual, in our society, can only mean a person who devotes himself to activities which require the use of the brain rather than brawn. Senator Fulbright, the former Rhodes scholar, would probably find such a definition inadequate. He would perhaps prefer a

closer scrutiny of brain-work to eliminate any who do original thinking but have not attained the scholar's A. But then, neither Thomas Edison nor George Westinghouse could have obtained a Fulbright scholarship, provided by the American taxpayer, to educate American students abroad. The difference between Cecil Rhodes and Senator Fulbright is that Rhodes put up his own money to give a British education to Americans and other Anglo-Saxons, but Fulbright's scholarships come from the Government Treasury and the persons involved should be called wards of the Treasury. It is curious how one man's name latched itself on to something that all the people of the United States are paying for.

But that does not make anyone an intellectual; that is, someone who is different from all others, like a Hanlin scholar in ancient China, who, it was said, walked on eggs. Among the Jews in the ghetto, the intellectual was one who could read the Talmud and my father used to say that he could put a pin through 27 pages and tell which letter the pin had pricked. And I always wondered what that proved. On the other hand, a shoemaker was regarded as a low-down creature. Why a shoemaker should be lower than a man who could put a pin through 27 pages, I never could understand, all men being equal in the eyes of the Lord.

IN THE United States, no intellectual class exists. Nobody is set aside as elite, either by political prestige, family distinction, intellectual attainments or extraordinary wealth. There may be a few

who believe that they are superior to others, but that is only temporary. Ours is truly a classless society in the strict sense that no position and few advantages in life are hereditary. If the rich do not move from shirt-sleeves to shirt-sleeves in three generations, they do it in two and the son of a professor in a university might well be a taxicab driver or a jazz musician. Each man forms the pattern of his own life to a very great degree.

Therefore when one speaks of the intellectuals of this country, he is denominating a class that does not exist. Now, in Czarist Russia, it did exist because so few were literate that those who could read were ipso facto superior to those who could not read.

The snobbish may excite themselves over having read a few more printed words than another man read. But the brains of many untutored men have produced some remarkable results, particularly in business where such a one as Andrew Carnegie built a unit like the United States Steel Corporation without even a B.A. degree.

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